California Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee

Final Report Executive Summary

Background

What Is a Quality Rating and Improvement System?

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a uniform set of standards, graduated by level of quality, to assess and improve early learning and care programs. Objective ratings help families identify programs, guide providers in making improvements, and give policymakers a basis for designing technical assistance. QRISs provide supports, such as workforce development and finance incentives, to improve quality. California, in proposing a QRIS, joins 23 other states and the District of Columbia which have adopted these systems. California is a leader in designing a QRIS that purposefully links child outcomes, including school readiness, with improvements in program quality.

Why Develop a Quality Rating and Improvement System?

More than half of California's third graders do not meet state educational standards in language, and the roots of the achievement gap start much earlier. For example, differences in vocabulary development, an important indicator for school readiness, are apparent as early as 16 months of age.

- The good news is that quality programs can help improve children's readiness and school success, with higher test scores, better attendance, less grade retention, and long-term benefits in school completion and lifetime earnings.
- Only quality programs achieve these dramatic results, however. Poor-quality programs leave children further behind, are unsafe and unhealthy, and potentially can cause harm to our youngest children.
- Based on a sample of programs in California, researchers found that nearly 50 percent of the infant and toddler programs provided poor quality care, and that the quality of preschool programs was at best mixed, with problems ranging from basic deficits in health and safety to shortfalls in teaching and learning.
- According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, no statewide system measures the quality of early learning and care programs in California (LAO, 2007), and even the basic licensing system is weak.
- California urgently needs to develop a quality rating system and redesign the quality improvement and safety monitoring system in California for programs serving over one million children ages birth to five annually.

What Are the Major Policy Issues?

Policy: Establish unified statewide standards and appropriate oversight for the early learning and care system.

California currently has multiple early learning and care "systems" with great variability in standards and far too little oversight.

- The state has four early learning and care "systems" – license-exempt care, Title 22 licensed facilities, Title 5 state-contracted child development programs, and federally administered Head Start, plus additional projects and "semi-systems." Only two of these "systems" – Title 5 and Head Start – have standards that might be expected to promote child development or school readiness.
- With the possible exception of Head Start, currently none of these systems are rated with sufficient frequency by trained, objective observers to ensure that they actually meet the standards.
- Families do not have information about the quality of their young child's early learning and care setting and its impact on their child's learning, health, and well-being.

Policy: Provide reimbursement rates that allow for quality improvement.

Current reimbursement rates for publicly subsidized programs provide little incentive for quality improvement. California has what might be called a reverse tiered reimbursement system – higher rates are paid to voucher programs that are only expected to meet minimal standards than to state-contracted programs held to much higher standards.

Policy: Strengthen the child development professional development career pathway.

While there is broad agreement that good teaching and responsive care is the key to quality early learning and care programs, most teachers lack degrees in child development, the pathway to higher education is cumbersome at best, compensation is low, and turnover is high.

Policy: Establish a statewide evaluation system to determine the impact of early learning and care programs on child outcomes.

California does not track the impact of the more than 56,000 licensed settings for children ages birth to five on their school readiness and kindergarten through grade twelve achievement. Establishing a unique child identifier for children enrolled in early learning and care programs would help the state to track improvements in program quality and the impact on child outcomes. The evaluation system can improve the accountability and transparency of our public investments.

Proposed Design of Quality Rating Structure

- The proposed QRIS structure establishes a five-tier block system that assesses five quality elements for the rating structure: ratios and group size; teaching and learning; family involvement; staff education and training; and program leadership. Within each tier for each element, there are standards that a program must meet before it can advance to the higher tier.
- The proposed QRIS establishes a cohesive set of quality standards for all programs.
- To obtain the entry-level rating, a center or family child care home would, among other requirements, have to meet the basic licensing standards; to advance to the mid-level rating, a program or provider would have to meet standards similar to the more stringent Title 5 state contract standards for early childhood programs; and, at the top level, the requirements incorporate nationally recommended standards, such as Head Start.
- Objective ratings using standardized assessment tools help families identify programs, guide providers in making improvements, and give policymakers a basis for designing technical assistance and other quality improvement initiatives.
- QRIS will inform families and public policy through:
  - Standardized assessments to measure the quality of teaching and learning
  - Higher ratings for programs and providers who demonstrate engaging and partnering with parents
  - Higher ratings for well-qualified staff trained in early childhood education, including ongoing professional development
  - Higher ratings for sufficient staffing and small group size
  - Higher ratings for programs with well-qualified directors

Proposed Support Systems

How the Rating System Will Work: Oversight and Conduct of Ratings

- Establish a rating process for every two to three years involving Environmental Rating Scales and, at higher tiers, Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) assessments that measure teacher-child interactions.
- Use a combination of local and state oversight, with QRIS reviews done at the county or regional level and with state-level oversight and assurance of consistency.

Technical Assistance to Help Programs Improve

Upon entry into the QRIS, every early learning program will be offered a "quality improvement plan" that explains the rating and provides clear direction on how to improve, building a learning community that fosters continuous program improvement.

- Technical assistance (TA) focuses on informing programs about QRIS, helping programs to move up to higher tiers, and sustaining higher tiers.
- TA is voluntary, builds on local-state-national expertise and delivery systems, and uses a client-driven, data-based coaching model as well as other strategies that support continuous program improvement.

▪ TA builds on California's early learning resources, including the *California Preschool Learning Foundations*, *California Infant/Toddler Learning & Development Foundations*, the *California Preschool Curriculum Framework*, and child assessment tools that provide research-based, effective practice and that link to kindergarten and elementary education.

Workforce Development to Promote Effective Teachers

California's early learning and care workforce and professional development system will have greater accessibility, accountability, and coherence.

▪ By 2012, Early Childhood Educator Competencies, which include the *Foundations* and *Frameworks*, will be developed into a common and comprehensive course of study that are reflected in courses for Associate and Bachelor degrees and delivered statewide. Credit-bearing courses are required for degrees.
▪ Using the statewide common and comprehensive course of study based on the Competencies:
  o By **2013**, all California community colleges that offer early learning and care programs incorporate the "core eight" classes and additional courses to reflect designated lower division early childhood educator competencies into their degree programs.
  o By **2014**, all CSU, University of California, and private higher education institutions that offer early childhood education programs align these courses to a common and comprehensive course of study across the two and four-year degree system.
▪ By 2015, a clear and accessible system of demonstrating the Early Childhood Educator Competencies equivalency for courses will be developed and publicized, including clear criteria and deliverables. This includes courses taken from out-of-state and foreign institutions and non- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accredited institutions, as well as Early Childhood Educator Competencies developed through professional practice.

Strategies to Encourage Family Involvement

The QRIS establishes opportunities for families to become involved in their children's early care and education, to strengthen their impact as their child's first teacher, and to partner with early learning programs and educators.

Data Systems to Track Progress

The first steps in developing an early childhood education data information system are to develop a unique child identifier based on birth certificate numbers and to assess needs and current data collection processes for young children, teachers and providers, programs, and policymakers.

Financial Model and other Resources for Future Funding

1. The development of a funding model aligned with the quality rating scale for early learning and care programs that serve children from birth to five years of age be continued through the Early Learning Advisory Committee (ELAC), which has been established to continue work on this and other issues.
   - Cost analysis will use both the National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC) Cost Calculator and other cost estimation methods, as refined through the pilot project(s).
   - Further study will be conducted of the most effective types, levels, and delivery methods for financial and non-financial incentives.
   - Further planning for a QRIS will consider the option of a progressive build-out as resources become available, as well as the full-funding possibility for statewide implementation.
2. The pilot test phase is essential to the long-term success of the QRIS. It is vital to test the feasibility and value of a collaborative approach involving partnerships with local entities to increase the resources available for implementing the system.
3. Existing funding steams may be adapted or redirected, and existing funding sources will be incorporated, to the maximum extent possible, in both the pilot test phase and statewide build-out of a QRIS. Further work will develop a QRIS specifically designed to prepare California for the strongest possible application for federal funding streams.

Tough Policy Issues Remaining

1. Licensing – While it is urgent to restore annual inspections of centers and biennial inspections of family child care homes, opportunities to integrate monitoring of health and safety issues with program quality rating need to be explored.
2. Data –The state build existing systems in a way that includes all early learning programs, regardless of setting.
3. Finance – Providing higher reimbursements for publicly subsidized programs that meet higher standards is a priority; identifying effective incentives for private programs is also needed.
4. Teacher qualifications – Exploring what we know, and what we do not know about the added value of various types of professional development for early childhood educators is necessary.
5. Teacher preparation system articulation and access – It is necessary to ensure that timelines in accessibility and articulation improvements are met.
6. Pilot programs – The pilots need to inform implementation of QRIS system, and we need to find ways to make progress now even in the current budget crisis.

Next Steps for QRIS

Ideas on Oversight, Participation, and Pilot Projects

CAEL QIS statewide implementation could be phased in over five or more years, beginning with a three-year pilot that includes sufficient time for prior planning and subsequent evaluation. After the conclusion of the voluntary pilot testing and local implementation efforts, consideration would be given to a roll-out that includes voluntary participation for all programs, followed by required participation in QRIS for publicly funded programs, and, finally, for all licensed programs. The vision is that participation in the QRIS is initially voluntary with appropriate funding and incentives provided, and ultimately required for all early learning and care programs.

Outreach and Communication Plan

Once the QRIS is ready to launch, broad outreach and communication will be developed and provided to families, programs and providers, stakeholders, and the public.

Transition to ELAC

The CAEL QIS Advisory Committee's responsibilities will merge with the ELAC. The transition to ELAC leadership is under way. ELAC's success depends on our public leaders' commitment and our own dedication to garnering public will to champion the phased implementation and continuous improvement of a QRIS to ensure optimal early learning outcomes for all California children.